

Power at the Centre: is the National Economic Council a Model for a New Way of Organising Things?

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THE CENTRE of government in the United Kingdom is often regarded by the media and commentators as evil, over-powerful, the home of armchair or sofa government. This is often accompanied by pleas that the Prime Minister and his office should leave other ministers and departments to get on with things without constantly interfering in their work—‘micro managing’ is the usual insult. These critiques of course usually come from the same people who will—on other days—ask why the Prime Minister is not giving leadership, keeping a grip, driving the agenda and so on.

Certainly at times the Prime Minister and his close coterie can make decisions and force them through without much in the way of discussion or accountability to others. There are examples through history of this, and in the Blair premiership a domestic policy example was the school academies programme. It is even more so in international policy where leader-to-leader negotiation is more and more the norm and so the foreign office, let alone the rest of the government, get much less of a look in. But the degree of all this is mightily exaggerated not least by the way that politics is covered in the media—with excessive focus on the characteristics (especially political) and activities of the team within Number Ten.

More generally, it is quite easy to argue that although the centre is theoretically very powerful, in international terms it is relatively weak in its ability to devise and see through its strategies.¹ When speak-

ing to those from the centre of government from other countries over the last few years I have often found myself facing bemused looks as I explained the very small size of Number Ten and the complex ways that we used to try and shape and drive the agenda.

Here I describe how the centre exercises its power, get its way and influences things. The discussion largely surrounds the way things worked in my period of involvement as a special adviser in departments (1997–2002 and 2005–7) and in Number Ten (2007–10). Each administration and leader will do things differently, but I hope it gives some insight. I then go on to discuss the National Economic Council an attempt to strengthen the ability of the government to act fast and in a united way in response to the economic crisis that engulfed the United Kingdom in the later 2000s, and explore whether that institutional setup offers ways of improving the way the centre of government works in the future.

The formal architecture

Formally, Cabinet and Cabinet Committees are the place where decisions are made and in certain areas, on certain topics and in certain circumstances they are very important. Cabinet as a ‘meeting’ rarely takes decisions itself, but the fact that Cabinet members unhappy enough with a decision can make a fuss at a Cabinet meeting if they want—and Cabinet being such a leaky place—means that

efforts are made to do deals and sort conflicts out before an issue comes to Cabinet. The existence of Cabinet is therefore very important in ensuring that, in one way or another, colleagues are consulted, even if that is rarely done formally at Cabinet meetings themselves.

Of course the centre has some power here. It controls more or less what comes to Cabinet and in what form, and the Prime Minister chairs Cabinet which can give a lot of control. But this is within limits as to what the real issues of the day are and what Cabinet members are most exercised about. One cannot indefinitely keep things off the agenda that are issues of real concern, and one cannot ignore the strong feelings of important members of Cabinet.

While Cabinet is usually weekly, the various Committees usually meet less regularly but are more focused. They are there to help make decisions in specific areas such as health, national security or the Olympics. However, again the meetings themselves rarely sort out conflicts between secretaries of state. If there are major disagreements, then bilaterals, or meetings brokered by Number Ten, are more important than shouting matches and confrontational votes at the Committee itself. Only where Committees have a lower rank of ministerial involvement (often sub-committees) are the meetings themselves like to be fora where deals are struck and disagreements and compromises played out—although junior ministers generally are loath to do deals of much significance at them, keeping tight to their departmental script.

The Chair of a Committee does matter. Some have agendas; some are born deal makers—although with a danger of going for the lowest common denominator. Some take it seriously; others not. Some perform; others visibly want to be somewhere else.

The Treasury is also very important in Committee life. Usually the Chief Secre-

tary is on virtually every Committee of any note with a brief to maintain the Treasury position on spending, not only controlling demands for cash now, but standing up against policies that look as though they will put upward pressure on resources over time.

The centre—or specifically Number Ten—has a surprisingly light grip on what is going on in these meetings. The Secretariat, part of the Cabinet Office reporting to the top civil servant, the Cabinet Secretary, is key. They know what is coming up and indeed are often crucial in deciding that something must come to a Committee since its consequences go beyond affecting one department. They oversee the papers the Committee receive and write the steering brief paper for the Chair (often and inevitably only read in the two minutes before the meeting) usually including a desirable outcome of the meeting. So Number Ten Policy Unit members try to keep abreast of the civil servants manning them and my experience was that that relationship works very well—within reason and without being seen as a stooge of Number Ten, the Cabinet Office staff see themselves as trying to help the Prime Minister achieve his aims, and not just as honest brokers.

Number Ten policy unit members (and Number Ten Private Office staff) can attend Committees—the only people bar Cabinet Office staff and ministers usually allowed. But they are generally more there as observers than as participants, unless advice is asked for on where the Prime Minister stands on a particular issue. Of course in keeping up with what is going on in Cabinet Committees, Policy Unit and Number Ten Private Office staff can alert the Prime Minister to any controversies and seek out his views in different ways to be fed to the key players. Indeed, sometimes ministers will seek that view themselves as most of them are keen not to go directly against the Prime Minister's views on a key

issue—or at least not without knowing that they are doing so.

The Policy and other Units

If that is the formal Cabinet Committee role, then other elements are at work, too. The way these things operate varies over time and certainly did over the New Labour years. A key part of the system through both Brown and Blair premier-ships was the Policy Unit. Blair played around with it quite a lot (purely political appointees; mixed up with civil servants; even merged with Private Office at one point to avoid separate strands of advice coming up). During the Brown premiership, although the membership varied a little it was usually about ten special advisers with a handful of support staff (a few shared personal assistants, and two or three young, bright civil servants seconded in from their departments). Most members of the Policy Unit covered two or more departments. They were mostly experienced policy experts, and—unusually—most had experience as advisers in other departments.

The Policy Unit has a multiple set of functions. At one level it is the eyes and ears of the Prime Minister, knowing what is going on in departments, looking out for trouble or interesting ideas, keeping abreast of stakeholder views, keeping the Prime Minister informed. At another level it can be the initiator and pursuer of ideas, working with the Prime Minister on ideas and initiatives—either kicked off by him or by one of them—and then trying to persuade ministers and departments to take them on.

It is very important that Number Ten works as a unit. That means special advisers working closely with officials—especially the Private Office (always important in any department, but much more so at Number Ten)—and liaising closely with the press and strategic communications personnel. Add to this very small central cadre the incredible pace of

life around the Prime Minister, and you have a very stretched operation. But its very smallness does mean that one can try and keep an overview of what is going on—make sure that there is some coherence across policy areas, some consistency; ensure that no departments are going to sleep; try and make some sense out of all the little decisions. Overall it is the centre that has to formulate and articulate the vision and the shape—and so give the vitally needed sense of direction to government.

How the centre in fact gets its way—when it does—is hard to pin down. The Policy Unit is listened to by other departments if there is respect for the intellectual arguments being made and if they are seen to be what the Prime Minister wants. Sometimes slightly harder forms of persuasion are needed, with ministers needing to understand the politics behind the initiatives. And at times, prime ministerial meetings with ministers are required—although the ultimate threat implicit in the fact that the Prime Minister decides on re-shuffles lies very much in the background.

In addition to the Policy Unit, Number Ten usually has to some degree at its disposal other units staffed by the civil service that report in to the centre. The Prime Ministers Delivery Unit (PMDU), set up by Tony Blair to chase down progress on delivery mainly in the public service departments, gave a certain leverage to the centre in the Blair and Brown years. For policy and strategy thinking, the Strategy Unit that was based in the Cabinet Office was important and its origins and evolution have been well described by one of its key members: David Halpern.² This Unit could help the Prime Minister's policy team work ideas up, think through new policies, either in cooperation with departments or, when necessary, keeping it private from them. This at least gave an independent source of research and analytic capacity that ministers in departments

get from their civil service team but is otherwise strangely lacking in Number Ten.

So although the centre has a number of tools, it is hard in practice to really drive the government machine. The tools are indirect, tend to be bilateral and are thinly spread.

The National Economic Council: a different way

On the whole, making this smorgasbord of levers and incentives work as well as possible is how we managed in my time working at Downing Street during the Brown premiership. But there was an exception. The National Economic Council (NEC) was created in response to the economic crisis of 2007/8. Following the fall of Northern Rock in September 2007, the economy was on flashing amber. The collapse of Lehman's a year later pushed the economy firmly onto red. For a while the focus of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor was almost exclusively on preventing what looked the potential full collapse of the banking system. As this proceeded, however, it became clear that economic policy was going to be of supreme importance for some time and needed to be geared up fast to both try to avoid as much of a fall in GDP as was possible, but also to minimise the damage of whatever fall in GDP occurred. This was not only because it had real effects on real people, but because such effects on employment, business failure and investment, repossessions and so on would prolong any recession and would in turn have long-lasting effects on the economy and its potential. The view then was that new machinery was needed at the heart of government to reflect these new and urgent priorities. The impetus came from the Prime Minister himself who, like most Prime Ministers, believed that setting up committees and other bodies could and did help provoke the machine.³

There were concerns at the whole concept to begin with, which I certainly shared. Was another committee what we really needed or a distraction? Would the Prime Minister really have enough time to do this? Most importantly it all relied on Treasury playing ball. Clearly from many perspectives the NEC was a dilution of the Treasury having a monopoly of economic policy thinking. In my experience across work as a civil servant in the Treasury in the Thatcher/Lawson years and as Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers there in the later years of the Brown Chancellorship, the Treasury fights hard to keep other departments out of economic policy—one of the reasons why having a strong minister at the business department often ends in tears (I worked there too!).

Membership

The NEC was set up very quickly in September 2008 so that it first met in October in a period of extreme danger for the economy. It was always clear that the Treasury (both the Chancellor, who was Deputy Chair, and the Chief Secretary), the business department (Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform [BERR] to begin with, and later Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS]) and the Department for Work and Pensions [DWP] had to be members of the NEC. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) at the time covered innovation, universities and adult skills and so was also core. But the whole point was to bring more departments into a world where they felt they were part of a collective effort to try to react fast to the recession. This led to including the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) (both the Secretary of State, who was the lead in local government, and the Minister for Housing), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), and perhaps less

obviously to the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) partly because at the time soaring energy prices were a real concern. Not least because of his knowledge about the economy, the Secretary of State for Education, Ed Balls, also attended—something that proved vital as schemes to avoid school leavers going straight on to the dole became more important. The Foreign Secretary was also a member partly because of the international nature of the crisis. Added to this was the Deputy Leader of the Labour party, who was also Minister for Women. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were also represented. Sometimes this felt strange as many issues (like skills) were devolved matters. Yet the ability to compare approaches across the nations of the United Kingdom turned out to be very useful overall.

Right from the beginning there was a determination to keep the group at a very high level (that is, secretary of state level). But another advantage of the NEC (over the Cabinet at least) was that in addition to the secretaries of state, key junior ministers were also members and in particular the very knowledgeable ‘business’ peers in the government that we had amassed—hence over the period Myners from the Treasury, Davies and Vadera from BIS, Drayson from DIUS and Carter from BERR/DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport). On the whole, other ministers were kept to a minimum, and to keep the attendance at a high level, replacements were almost never permitted.

There was some debate at the beginning about whether outsiders should be members. If the NEC was to be in a sense an Economic War Council should we not have some business leaders, trade unionists, some key economic thinkers, maybe the Governor of the Bank of England as members? In the end, the fear that this would lead to less than full discussions and an understanding that the main aim was to turbo-charge the government

machine meant that such people did not become members but they were invited in an ad hoc way to present to the Committee from time to time.

Processes

In my experience, the fact of a forthcoming meeting between ministers is as important at getting the Whitehall Machine motoring, thinking and acting as the actual meeting itself. This was very true for the NEC. Key to everything was the role of the NEC Secretariat, driven by the Cabinet Office which formally reported to the Cabinet Secretary. This was given a powerful first head (a fairly recent ex-principal private secretary at Number Ten) who had clear authority and saw it through its first few months, who was followed by highly respected senior staff seconded from other departments. The Secretariat itself had several leading Treasury members (who reported to the Treasury Permanent Secretary) as well as top notch staff from other departments (all for once eager to give some of their best people to a secretariat they knew would be important). The role of the Treasury members of the Secretariat in not playing a pure Treasury gate-keeping role was vital and much appreciated—certainly by me!

The NEC Secretariat leadership met regularly with the permanent secretary at Number Ten, the relevant private secretary and myself (as Senior Adviser to the Prime Minister on the Economy), as well as the Treasury to ensure that we were managing the agenda, that it reflected the Prime Minister’s interests and concerns, and that work was being prepared so that we had the basis of good discussions at NEC.

Those forcing mechanisms allowed us to get departments moving fast on policy development. The process was usually that the Secretariat would develop a commissioning letter to go to one or more departments. We would then hold a

meeting with officials from these departments, normally at a pretty senior level, to talk through what was wanted, what the issues were, what the problems were, and sort out a realistic but pacy timetable. Quite often we had had a pre-meeting with the Treasury to ensure we were united.

It was at these meetings that any conflicts or problems emerged and senior officials could be persuaded to go further than their pure short-term departmental interest might have taken them. On my networks I kept in touch with relevant secretaries of state and special advisers to tell them what we were doing, why we were doing it and try to make sure they gave a steer to their officials that gave them room to manoeuvre: officials without a steer from ministers tend to be very conservative and reluctant to move.

The quality of papers was generally good for other reasons, too. This was a high-powered committee chaired by the Prime Minister with the Chancellor as deputy (they symbolically sat together at the top of the table rather than opposite each other half way round it as at Cabinet), with many top ministers present and with the Cabinet Secretary and Treasury Permanent Secretary at the table. Nobody wanted to present a poor paper in front of that lot. I have learned never to underestimate those sort of 'nudge' influences on ministers and officials.

Flanking groups

Meanwhile in parallel with the NEC were two other committees. One was the officials committee, again at a very high level (Permanent Secretaries) that met once a week and was known as NEC (O). This took draft versions of papers that were due to go to NEC as well as papers that went a bit more widely. Unlike NEC itself, it almost always had a presentation of the current situation from the Treasury. (I did not attend, but I did see the minutes and agendas.) This body made

sure that the officials' side felt the heat down the official channels as well as the ministerial—often just as important to officials whose promotion prospects are determined more by how they are regarded by their civil service bosses than by their political masters.

The other committee to some degree locked the political side of the house into the NEC. This was a less formal group called the NEC Advisers Council, which in effect consisted of the key policy-focused special advisers from the departments that attended NEC, plus one or two other key members of the Number Ten political staff working on strategic communications. This weekly meeting, chaired by myself with one of the key Treasury advisers as deputy chair (to mirror the NEC), looked at upcoming papers for the NEC, discussed in more depth forthcoming departmental plans around major data release moments (like unemployment and GDP) and white papers, and took up wider issues with an economic angle that were sometimes not taken by NEC itself, like the G20, the climate change negotiations and the latest news on the car industry.

This had enormous value in itself, allowing advisers, and so their ministers, to understand directly what we were trying to achieve at the NEC and so reduce resistance to it. But it also helped to keep a sense of unity around the political net. Despite what one might expect, there are not that many policy-focused meetings of special advisers. Right through the Blair and Brown years there was a weekly meeting of all special advisers but that ranged widely and was not particularly focused. So usually one relied on bilateral meetings or calling special advisers together when an issue hit a conflict and Number Ten or someone else felt there was a need. Regular meetings of the NEC Advisers Council therefore was unusual and helped build coherence and understanding. This was helped greatly by the fact that both I and

the Treasury advisers were happy to talk about the economic situation, the macro strategy and take often very direct questions in a way that few other fora ever allowed.

Issues

It is of course not possible to know what would have happened without the institutional innovation of the NEC. No doubt some of the measures taken would have been enacted anyway, but I very much doubt if all of it would have, on such a fast timescale; nor would so much have been delivered so fast without the scrutiny of the NEC bearing down on departments or without the pressure put upon them, including the Treasury, by the collective power that the NEC unleashed and its ability to let the centre bring a focus to this key issue. So while the major fiscal and monetary decisions, allied to the behaviour of employers, were the lynchpin as to why the recession was less painful than previous recessions,⁴ the work of the NEC was vital too.

Instances where the NEC played at least a role in their formulation, scale or speed and thoroughness of execution included: measures to help the young unemployed and the longer term unemployed; help for school leavers not only when they leave in September, but also in January for those still without anything; support for business through the Time to Pay schemes (that allowed deferral of tax, VAT and National Insurance contributions), through business lending schemes and help for trade credit insurance; help for the car industry not least through the scrappage scheme and help for training where hours were reduced; support to the house-building industry through kick start and shared equity products; support for those in mortgage arrears through help with mortgage interest, a mortgage rescue scheme, the homeowners mortgage support scheme (postponing interest payments) and stamp

duty holidays; support and coordination of consumer advice for those getting into debt and moves to be tougher on credit card and other lending; and support to regeneration schemes that were in danger of collapsing.⁵

Problems

The NEC was in any terms a success. It did join up departments. It speeded up decision making and delivery. It did give collective buy-in to positions. Officials liked it and so did most ministers (especially those normally frozen out of economic policy discussions). But if we want to learn from it we need to consider the nature of the problems that emerged and had to be overcome.

Problems arose for a variety of reasons. One was what the Treasury would allow to be discussed, where there were a number of sticking points. Not surprisingly the Treasury jealously guarded its monopoly and its views on the fiscal and macro position and positively discouraged discussion about options for budgets and pre-budget reports (PBRs) on these issues. Indeed, these discussions had in previous years been kept largely away from Number Ten as well, and it was only in the Brown premiership period that this loosened up a little with intensive discussions between key Treasury officials and advisers and a very small number of us in Number Ten in the run up to 'fiscal events' like Budgets and PBRs.

The same applied to tax policy. In general, tax decisions are left almost entirely to the Treasury. Departments ritualistically make their bids for tax changes and sometimes some win through, but there is almost never a general discussion about the pros and cons of particular tax breaks or public subsidies, let alone the priority among them. This in a way the NEC was designed to break down. It needed to get consensus across departments as to what the real priority

for the government collectively was. So although specifics were kept off the agenda, the general issue of where we might put any available resource as a grant, tax incentive or subsidy was discussed collectively more than it was in normal times.

One of the most sensitive issues—and it will always be one—was to do with bank lending. To put it at its crudest, the business department would see it as its role to argue that there was a severe lack of lending to business (especially small business) while in a similar vein the housing minister would want to argue that banks were being too hard on those in mortgage repayment problems and that mortgages (especially for first time buyers) were getting unaffordable due to the behaviour of the banks. Implicitly or explicitly they wanted to use the NEC to put pressure on the Treasury to do something to sort this out.

The Treasury did not like having these debates in the open at NEC for various reasons—and they were often where the most sparks flew. Institutionally they felt that the markets needed time to adjust; that demand was as much a problem facing business lending as supply; that anecdotes were dominating factual analysis; and that lending before the crash had been excessive anyway. More than any of this, they tended to feel this was their call, not that of other departments and definitely not something to be argued out in the open forum of the NEC. In the end, these sorts of discussions had to take place elsewhere in bilaterals and with Number Ten talking privately to the Treasury.

Finally, and as the Treasury had predicted, departments felt it very hard to resist using the NEC as a place to bid for more funding, especially in the run up to a budget or PBR. In general for Cabinet Committees there is a rule that papers cannot go to the Committee unless the Treasury is happy. This ensures that uncoded general pitches for funds are

not made in the 'public' arena of a committee rather than in a bilateral between the department and the Treasury. And it helps the Treasury keep the very important line that spending is decided at spending reviews, not in between them.

At the NEC this was harder to police and departments often made overt or less obvious pitches for money. In a sense this was fair enough as we were deciding, by definition, that the crisis meant we needed to alter both the scale of spending and the sequencing of spending, and sometimes to shift money from one part of a department to another part or even across departments. Treasury often felt defensive when these points arose, especially if they thought Number Ten was encouraging or at least supporting such a bid. On the whole though, the Treasury lived with such events, albeit closing down discussions when we came near a fiscal event.

Second, it became clear in a number of discussions that ministers wanted to discuss presentation of policy as much as the detail. What tone should we be using? Was information on our actions and the help now available getting through to business and those in debt? How did we show progress (for instance, on a number of the schemes to help mortgage holders where the very creation of them had helped steady the markets but meant very few people actually used the schemes—much to the derision of the media and the opposition)? Of course this was an important part of the discussion: colleagues debating these issues, becoming comfortable with the consensus and so all being prepared to use the same sort of lines. It also mattered because the economic confidence of the public, with its feedback into real economy outcomes, depended to at least some degree on what we were communicating. With busy ministers, however, it took up too much NEC time—and the Prime Minister did not always consider it a great use of his time.—This was 'solved' by having a standard

part of each meeting where a report on communications was given and later, by creating a sub-committee chaired by the Secretary of State for BIS where a self-selecting group of ministers could and did discuss pure issues of communication, message and so on.

Third, was the issue of the time and focus of senior ministers and especially of the Prime Minister. For many members of the Committee, the meetings were important ways to influence the position the government was taking on the key political and policy issue of the day, one that would determine their political futures and legacy. However, the Prime Minister always has other tasks and other priorities to see to. Meetings that did not seem crucial to make a decision but were more to debate issues (for instance, what areas were going to be left worse off by the recession and whether we wanted early, pre-emptive action or not) seemed as time went on to be the wrong use of time.

Fourth, although the NEC allowed policy formulation, analysis and decision making to be much accelerated, it did not necessarily mean that things were delivered. Departments on the whole were not used to going at such a fast pace, and were institutionally reluctant to disrupt their other work or reallocate key staff. In addition, because many of the 'schemes' and initiatives involved working with other non-government stakeholders (finance, mortgage products, etc.), they were complex and difficult to push along fast. This issue was never totally answered, but fairly quickly we moved to using the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) to work with departments to help them set proper and sensible trajectories and indicators for delivery, chase down problems and generally keep their nose to the grindstone. PMDU then reported regularly at NEC meetings.

Finally there was always the issue of those who were not members of the NEC.

Yes, overall economic policy was regularly on the agenda at Cabinet so that everyone in theory got their chance to discuss the economy, but for reasons outlined above there was never really a great deal of discussion there. So some key political players were not fully bought in to regular discussions of economic policy and felt they were left outside of the key debates. In some areas the exclusion was a bit crazy and so we had to invite in an ad hoc way—for example, the Department of Transport when we were discussing the potential for introducing Infrastructure UK; and the various public service departments when we wanted papers on what work they were doing to try to forecast, monitor and respond to increases and/or changes in demands for their services as a consequence of the recession. But the general problem of things not being taken at Cabinet on the basis that they were being discussed at NEC was always bound to upset some.

Lessons?

In considering whether the NEC model is a way through for the future, we need to think through the lessons that came from it—both its successes and its weaker points. First, it needed a crisis to get it set up. Indeed, in the first flush of enthusiasm it met twice a week, which was really too often to have prepared decent papers to discuss. It also felt important that it did not meet in one of the usual Cabinet Committee rooms in Cabinet Office or in the Cabinet Room at Downing Street, but in the COBRA (Cabinet Office Briefing Room Alpha)—a modern, secure meeting room in the Cabinet Office basement that is kitted out with screens all over the walls and so on so that it feels a special, 'action' place to be meeting. Out of economic crisis time it is unclear if any of this is needed or could be constructed. Time is rationed in government; one needs to be sure the added value of a new committee is worth it. This may be

why such committees are best at a point of crisis or intense decision making (for instance, over a spending review) and seen as following the 'task and finish' approach.

Second, to make such a body work, the lead department has to be prepared to cede some ground—possibly because there is a crisis. This can be a problem in other areas. Over the years there were experiments with different types of committees to look at, say, public services. Now when other government departments are affected by a decision it is fair enough to have them involved in that decision making to a degree (for example, CLG on education), but whatever the case for collective consideration, departments (even more than ministers in my experience) get pretty upset if other departments get a say on their policy areas otherwise.

Third, NEC type bodies only work where they have the gravitas and importance so that Whitehall takes them very seriously. This was done with the NEC partly though the place it occurred, the somewhat unique style of its activities, its powerful and well respected joint secretariat, and the use of flanking committees—both official and 'political'. Above all it needs a very busy Prime Minister to be fully committed, willing not only to find precious time to chair the meetings, but be fully engaged in their preparation and process.

The success of the NEC led to a similar approach in some other areas once the intense element of the economic crisis was over and the key decisions had been made. These included the Domestic Policy Council and the Democratic Renewal Council. In reality though, there is a limit to how many of these bodies can be run simultaneously. When the NEC was set up and the Prime Minister gave it all that time everyone knew it was the key committee of the day. As others were created, Whitehall started to read the signals about the NEC.

Conclusion

Is the centre of government too weak or too strong, and if the former is the NEC model a good one going forward to strengthen it? While I was sometimes quite taken aback at how hard it could be to get where we wanted, I think this had as much to do with politics, relative strengths, positions in a parliament (and a government) and so on as it did institutional structures. However, the general splintering of government into competing silos in different departments that I felt keenly as an adviser and as a civil servant is an on-going problem. Bodies like the NEC can help break these down. The Coalition government faces different issues—and has even more to gain from avoiding splintering. It did not continue the NEC. It may be that its various Coalition committees, coupled with the focus on cutting spending, will bring a sort of unity. Otherwise, bodies like the NEC are not only useful, but could well help as a more permanent part of the Whitehall furniture and not just an ad hoc response to crises.

Notes

- 1 Institute for Government, *Shaping Up: A Whitehall for the Future*, London, Institute for Government, 2010.
- 2 D. Halpern, Appendix, in *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010.
- 3 A. Seldon and G. Lodge, *Brown at 10*, London, Biteback Publishing, 2010, pp. 199–200.
- 4 R. Faccini and C. Hackworth, 'Changes in output, employment and wages during recessions in the United Kingdom', *Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin*, 2010, Q1. This was also true with respect to the rise in repossession and business failures.
- 5 <http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20100406025546>; <http://www.realhelpnow.gov.uk>